

Film on Appalachian Trail walking grandma gets closer to completion

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The Chronicle-Telegram

ELYRIA — Bette Lou Higgins' odyssey to transform the colorful story of Grandma Emma Gatewood into a TV documentary began in 2009 when she was hired to do voice-over work for a program sponsored by the Buckeye Trail Association.

"They sent me a script. Buried in the middle of it were a few sentences about Emma, the first woman to walk the Appalachian Trail alone," Higgins, an Elyria resident, recalled Thursday.

"That stopped me in my tracks," Higgins said with a hearty laugh. "I told the person who hired me, 'Never mind about the Buckeye Trail. Who the heck is Emma Gatewood?'"

Thus began Higgins' own adventure to dig up everything she could about the Gallipolis native who conquered the 2,050 miles of the Appalachian Trail from Maine to Georgia at age 67 in 1955.

Higgins' research led her to several daughters and a son, all of whom ranged in age from their mid-80s into their 90s.

One of the daughters, who was 93, died a week after speaking with Higgins.

"She led a lengthy hike herself in Pennsylvania the day before I spoke with her," Higgins said.

Put-in-Bay filmmaker Peter Huston's project is edging closer to raising



PHOTO PROVIDED

Anne McEvoy, a Lakewood actress, portrays Emma Gatewood, an Ohio native and the first woman to hike the Appalachian Trail solo.

the \$10,000 needed to qualify for a \$15,000 Ohio History Fund grant to complete the film, a project of Eden Valley Enterprises, an arts organization specializing in historical drama begun in 1977 by a group including Higgins.

Awarding of two recent grants totaling \$1,750 has pushed funding for the documentary close to the \$10,000 goal.

The documentary is budgeted at \$30,000 and is to be made for airing on a Toledo PBS television station.

A broadcast date has yet to be set, but Eden Valley Enterprises has promised a May 29 premiere for TrueNorth Cultural Arts at French Creek Nature Center, where "Trail Magic," a one-act play about Gatewood, debuted in August 2013.

"We've promised them something will happen," Higgins said.

The play stars Anne McEvoy, a Lakewood actress, as Gatewood.

McEvoy also is portraying the

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famed hiker in the film, which already has shot scenes along a wooded trail in a Lake County Historical Society park as well as Lyme Village in Bellevue.

Both locations stood in for the actual Appalachian Trail, where Huston hoped to shoot before the film's original \$90,000 budget had to be scaled back, Higgins said.

Despite standing 5 feet, 2 inches and weighing 120 pounds, Gatewood wasn't one to shy away from daunting challenges.

She first tried to walk the Appalachian Trail in 1954 after being inspired by a National Geographic story that noted the trail had never been walked by a woman alone.

Gatewood's first trip was

derailed early on after she got lost due to broken eyeglasses and had to be rescued by National Park rangers.

A year later she succeeded, walking the entire trail between May and September. She took only what she could fit in a knapsack and used a shower curtain to protect her from the elements.

She relied on the kindness of strangers living along the trail for food.

Along the way, she encountered snakes and bears but emerged from those "meetings" unscathed.

Gatewood once said, "Facing a bear in the woods wasn't much of anything after raising 11 children."

The determined woman walked the Appalachian Trail twice more before she died in 1973 at age 85.

Gatewood also is credited

with helping to create the 1,400-mile Buckeye Trail, which stretches from Lake Erie to the Ohio River.

"At this point we have a couple of applications in to foundations, but won't know much until closer to the end of the year," Higgins said. "We're mainly looking at individual donations between now and the end of 2014."

The project also needs another \$3,000 to cover costs of distributing the documentary once it's completed, Higgins said.

Visit the Facebook page for "Grandma Gatewood: Trail Magic" to check the film's progress, view photos, donate and get details on upcoming fundraisers.

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